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# Louis De Bernieres b. 1954 - Mavis Gallant - David Madden

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Interview led by Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis, February 1, 1997 “Other Places, Other Selves“ conference, First published in *JSSE* n° 29, 1997

1 Louis de Bernières lives in London and is the author of four novels and several short stories, many of which are set abroad, primarily in Latin America and Greece. In 1993 he was selected as one of the twenty Best of Young British novelists.

2 Mavis Gallant has been a short story writer since the early 1950’s, publishing her first works in *The New Yorker*. Born in Montreal, she traveled extensively before settling in Paris. Her impressive volume of *Collected Stories* was published in 1996. Many of them are set in Europe: France, Spain, Germany or Italy, for example.

3 David Madden was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He is the Director of the Civil War Center at Louisiana State University, author of several critical works and of short stories and novels. His novel *Sharpshooter*, published in 1996, recounts the experiences of a Civil war veteran and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

4 During the course of the afternoon discussion, the writers expressed a general disregard for setting, much as Eudora Welty does in her essay “Place in Fiction.” The consensus was that all components of a short story are linked, but that character, plot, narrative or technique have priority over setting as such. Indirectly expressed, one of the main ideas of the discussion is that the “other place” for these writers, all avowed “foreigners”, is fiction itself as it allows “another self” to come alive.

# I. On the conscious choice of setting

Emmanuel VERNADAKIS: How do you decide upon the setting of the short story?

David MADDEN: I don't feel a sense of deciding on a setting, ever, even though I'm aware of being a Southerner and I'm attracted to places in the South. An example of my not being that drawn to the South is that I've lived in Baton Rouge and near New Orleans for thirty years now and I've set only two stories in Louisiana: one before I ever got there which appeared in a men's magazine and "The New Orleans of Possibilities" which uses New Orleans as an image, a metaphor for the imagination (...) So the question is simple and I know why you ask it but it actually goes to the heart of what I do which is totally opposite from caring one way or the other about the setting.

Linda COLLINGE: So the setting is not the point of departure?

D.M.: No (...) what attracted me far more than the setting [in "The Singer"] is the technique and the sense of the power of the imagination...

E.V.: What about you Louis, is the notion of the setting important to your conception and creation of the story?

Louis de BERNIERES: I never think of the setting first. What usually happens is I get an idea for a short story or some way it just drops in my lap. Somebody gives it to me and then I have to think of the right place. So for example I didn't go to Cephalonia with the idea I was going to make a novel out of it. I just went there on a holiday and found a story waiting. And most of my short stories arise out of things that people have told me or things that arrived out of the blue and once they have arrived, I think you have very little choice as to where you set it. I couldn't possibly set the story I read here ["Stupid Gringo"], I don't know, in Brighton, could I? Because nobody is afraid of going to Brighton.

D.M.: I was robbed in Brighton!

L.d.B.: You should go to Bogota! I think the setting is dictated by the narrative and I am mainly interested in narrative. That's really what drives my writing.

E.V.: Do you feel the same way about that Mavis Gallant?

M.G.: What do you mean exactly?

E.V.: Do you think that the setting is not as important as the narrative?

M. G.: I don't think there's any difference. A story arrives with people and these people have their nationality, their background, the place they live in. It all arrives together, it's not divided up: the narrative, the setting, the story.

L. C.: But very often are there places that you've been, places where you have had on experience, and the story comes from something that happened there?

L.d.B.: Yes. I do have a natural sympathy for some places and not for others. So, I feel completely at home in Greece or Latin America. But other countries which I really love... I love Portugal but I've never really had the feeling that I could get a story out of it somehow. One day, maybe, I should be walking round in Porto and a story would fall from heaven and I should be lucky that way. I've never tried to set a story in France even though I'm really quite familiar with France. Because nothing has arrived.

L.C.: So very often the setting has been for you, to come back to the subject of the colloquium, another place...

L.d.B.: ... and the type of people who are in it, of course.

E.V.: So you mean that there is obviously a link between character and setting?

L.d.B.: Oh absolutely! I agree with Mavis. They arrive together. I agree with that completely.

L.C.: But are you personally attracted to places that are outside your home?

L.d.B.: Yes. That's exactly it because when I was nineteen I spent a year in Colombia and I think if I spent a year somewhere now, it would have far less effect on me. But at the age of nineteen, it's a tremendous culture shock going from Britain to Colombia and an even greater shock coming back to Britain. I could go into great length about that. I know I never really felt completely British again. Obviously I'm completely familiar with Britain and indeed I love it but I've always felt more European or more cosmopolitan. And one of my problems with setting things in Britain is that it's so familiar that I don't see it. But recently I had a conversation with a French artist I met in Pau. We were talking about Europe, Euro skepticism, etc... and he said to me "For me Britain is the most exotic country in Europe because I can to go Germany, I can go to Holland and it's just like France, but when I go to Britain, *c'est un asile immense.*" It's a huge lunatic asylum. When he said that I thought "Yes you're probably right." Since that time I have been beginning to set short stories in Britain just by trying to realize how mad we are!

D.M.: (...) I really regard Venice as my spiritual home (...) it is very curious to me how literal settings where I have spent my life do not really produce stories whereas metaphorical or spiritual settings that I choose to be metaphorical...see really I would have called [my short story] "The Venice of Possibilities" but instead I call it "The New Orleans of Possibilities." New Orleans does give me that feeling because it stimulates the imagination and that's really my home, the imagination. (...)

L.C.: Mavis, we find in several of your short stories the idea of English enclaves in other countries, France for example. Is that an area, related to the English enclaves in Montreal, that particularly interests you?

M.G.: I'm not aware of anything particularly interesting. Things just come up and I write about them... (...)

## II. On the link between character and setting

Andrew PAINTER: (...) When you start writing you've got place and the character which I agree you can't separate. But while you're writing, because you're writing a story, you're not writing an encyclopedia, you've got to select what you're going to put into the story and how you go along, or as you say, things come to you which are going to enter the story. So you can't put everything. And if we take place and "je", those two entities, then you've got to limit the number of elements which are concerned with place and you've got to limit the number of elements which are concerned with this "je". So is it, when you're writing, if you're writing in a sort of egotistical way, using the qualities which define "je" to define the place or do you use the place to define "je"? (...) Do you understand what I mean? I mean you're writing on a character who is in a place and there's a relationship between place and this "je".

M.G.: It's fusion, it's not relationship. It's fusion. That's a different thing.

A.P.: Yes but the fusion consists of two elements...

M.G.: No, they've become one at that point.

A.P.: (...) if we imagine that as a writer you try to fit yourself into the skin of this character in the story...

M.G.: If you're trying to, it's not going to work. It has to... it comes spontaneously. (...)

L.d.B.: I can say that what it feels like is them putting themselves into your skin. It feels like the character putting themselves into your skin, not you putting yourself into theirs. I'm sorry to get mystical but that is what it feels like. You often hear writers saying things like "It's like dictation from ghosts". You know, you can get quite spooked by it. These characters arrive and they rapidly become real and they rapidly take over the narrative so that when you're writing the narrative, you often have very little choice as to what the characters do. They even misbehave and you have to reconstruct the plot!

A.P.: I agree with that and I'm trying to construct a hypothetical question, based on this question asked in the title of the colloquium, whether the character imposes itself on you as a writer or you on the character?

M.G.: Neither. (...)

A.P.: Does the character's identity influence the place or is the place used to define the character?

L.d.B.: It's both, it's not either/or. It's a sort of complex symbiosis.

M.G.: I would say it's neither...

L.C.: David, would you mind if I put you on the spot...

D.M.: I would love to because I don't disagree with what Mavis is saying. I'm just different. So I'm not going to be disagreeing with her. I'm going to be expressing a different idea. I think you can separate place and character, I've done it many times. Places may come across to you my reader as very convincing and you're really there. But I can take a very mechanical artificial attitude and change it. (...)

## III. On the creative process: Listening to another self?

Marta DVORAK: [Louis] said something about "taking dictation from ghosts" and he makes [writing] sound as if it's very romantic. I'm sure there's a lot of hard work involved. And it would really be interesting if you could try and let us in on this process...

L.d.B.: When I'm writing, I mean, I was trying to think the other day, how can I describe what's happening, and the only phrase that I could come up with was "passionate imagination." Is that any help? I get so immersed in the world that is coming out of me or which is creating itself inside me that real life just goes to the dogs, so I don't go to the launderette, I don't cook and the house gets about that much dust...

M.G.: The plants die...

L.d.B.: The plants die! You know, my friends cut themselves off until I'm back to normal. And it's almost... the Ancient Greeks used to think of it as a kind of madness or a kind of possession. And that's really how I feel it is too.

M.D.: Do you write right from the beginning to the end? Do you rewrite?

L.d.B.: No, I might write the last chapter first and then the middle. I write whichever bit I fancy next. It isn't in any logical order and I usually don't work out what order my chapters are going to be in until I've got them all done.

M.G.: Well you have to think of it as an unedited film. Then the real work is putting the film together as economically and as clearly and with as little junk in it as possible.

M.D.: So most of it is clearing house actually?

M.G.: It's not all that easy. (...)

M.G.: You know, sometimes it's as if the story were already written and you are trying to attain it. And you just know there's something there and you're trying to get it. But it comes in bits and pieces exactly as he has said. It doesn't come chapter one page one... in my case, dialogue comes, long stretches of dialogue. But everyone is different.

D.M.: You know, the most thrilling moments for me are moments in revision, a technical reversal or decision that changes everything. Not some new development in a character necessarily. In fact, the technical decision produces the character. Getting back to critics, the best expression of what I already was doing and felt is *Technique is Discovery* by Mark Shore which I think is a really masterful essay in which he says: "technique is discovery, discovery of the people and the place and all those things that give you the illusion of reality." For me they come through technical choices. So I can get very thrilled. I decided after 2000 pages of *Sharpshooter* – which was about one family, half of it, then another family – to make a technical choice. I need a first person narrator instead of an omniscient narrator. I need somebody like that sharpshooter in the tower in that one page in the middle of the novel in its present form who can look out over everything. And it was the most thrilling moment in the whole fifteen years I spent on that book, when I realized the sharpshooter is the one that I need for the whole story. So for the next ten years it was revision, to get to your suggestion, it was a revision process that was every day equally as thrilling as the inspiration for the story itself. So the character was the product of a cold-blooded technical decision. And the character, I'm told, comes across as a living, breathing human being. To me that's far more magical than writing in a state of, always in a state of "passionate imagination," except I really like that phrase and it's really true to me too.

L.d.B.: You can use it.

D.M.: Yes, don't worry! (...)

## IV. On languages and translation

L.C.: Louis, in your latest novel Captain Corelli's Mandolin, set in Greece, there's a lot of language play (...) You use several languages: German, English, Italian and Greek. Is it with the hope that your reader will not understand, just as for the short story you read "Stupid Gringo"?

L.d.B.: Well, we're getting back to the subject of technique. It's often necessary to put in bits and pieces which you agree to not necessarily understand but which will give a feeling of authenticity and atmosphere. So for example I went to ask some Greek friends of mine for a list of all the best Greek obscenities. And I went to an Italian friend and did exactly the same thing, except that he gave me a list of the names of types of

ice cream to see if I'd fall for it. I'm not interested in obscurantism just for the sake of it or to try to be clever. It's really a question of atmospherics. I try to use people's... well, maybe the rhythm and word order of their own language. You'll find that in my Latin American novels the dialogue is written in a very similar word order to the way you would say it in Spanish although I used English words. And that's really to give a flavour of the language. I try to do the same with the odd bits of Italian and the odd bits of Greek. It's tricksterism, it's illusion-making and all I hope is that it works.

L.C.: And how does that work out in translation? Translating into Greek for example?

L.d.B.: Well, you know English is half Latin and half Germanic and I use almost exclusively the Latin half. So translating into most southern European languages is no problem at all. And my Greek translator said to me "Do you write on purpose to make it easy to translate?" And I said "No!". The Greek translation was the one I had the most trouble with because I had lots of quotations from Ancient Greek writers like Pindar and from Homer, etc... And my poor Greek translator had to try and find out what the original bits of Greek were. You see, to translate that book into French is no problem, you can just render the Ancient Greek as modern French, but my unfortunate Greek translator had to actually try and find the original quotations. And I couldn't remember where they came from half the time, like Pindar's Fifth Thracian Ode. I mean I don't even remember reading it.

A.P.: Do you know why you use the Latin part of English?

L.D.B.: Yes, it's partly because I had Latin hammered into me when I was a little boy at school and I was almost fluent in it by the time I was thirteen. Then, during all that time I studied French and then I spent my year in Colombia where I picked up bits of Spanish. I've just been eased in that direction. It's not a conscious artistic choice. I have a feeling that many American writers go for the Anglo-Saxon half.

E.V.: Is it for the same reason that there's no German point of view in your novels. I mean there is a Greek point of view, there's an Italian point of view, but there's no German point of view. You have an Italian who speaks in the first person, a Greek who speaks in the first person but not a German character...

L.d.B.: But I do have one German character who has something to say from time to time. You know, Lieutenant Weber?

L.C.: Yes, but it's dialogue, it's not in the narrative.

L.d.B. – That's true. That had never occurred to me.

## V. On foreignness

E.V.: V.S. Prichett said that he had somewhat of a foreign mind. Do you think that this applies to any of you?

M.G.: Foreign from what?

E.V.: Foreign from English, obviously.

M.G.: Well in my case, I've spent more than half my life in France, so I speak actually more French than English in my daily life, so I don't know, I can't make that apply.

L.d.B.: I think I'm a full-time foreigner.

E.V.: What do you mean by that? What do you think a foreigner is?

L.d.B.: A foreigner is, I suppose, someone who is always a little bit on the outside, never absolutely sure that they're fitting in. But fortunately for me I'm the kind of happy foreigner who loves wherever they go. I may be typically British. I think the British are like those great big stupid dogs that bound up to you in the park on a wet day and put muddy paws on your clean white shirt. I think I'm a bit like that, you know, wherever I go I think I'm welcome and I set about enjoying myself... so as chasing rubber balls.

D.M.: (...) I often think of myself as the man who fell from Mars. (...) I've always loved Byron's phrase, maybe from *Childe Harold*: "I moved among them but was not of them."

M.G.: Don't you think any artist thinks that?

D.M.: Yes any. I do. I think that is a habit of mind: being foreign. But I'd be curious to know whether people who aren't artists feel that way as a kind of permanent habit of mind that you only sometimes realize you have. I'm not sure it's different, it's just that maybe we do something with it that's different.

M.G.: I felt foreign until I left Canada and I don't mean that as a boutade. But I never felt that I fitted in and I was sure that there was nothing the matter with me. I just needed to find a society with people who thought the way I did. I came to Europe and I never had any more trouble. I'm serious.

D.M.: Yes, I know you are. But I can't imagine though myself finding that place even in Venice if I stayed there. The topic of your conference I mentioned to an editor, Maureen Hewett at the LSU Press. I said "Well the topic is this and it has made me really understand my work as a whole for the first time by my trying to answer it. I said "What do you think of this idea?"and before I could say anything she said "Oh but other places, other selves, that expresses what people experience when they read." That's a given for reading. And that's very simple, it occurred to me that was a simple thing for her to say, but it's absolutely true. That's why we read... it amazes me though that people who read for that reason want to pin down a specific place in relation to a specific character. Because I think that part of it is kind of irrelevant for me but not for some writers who actually consciously think in those terms because what they produce comes out of a conscious thinking in the terms that I think the question poses.

M.G.: Everybody must read Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*... It's just out, it's absolutely marvelous. It's in English.

L.C.: Mavis, you spoke last night of Paris being "the place you like best," "the place you like for writing." Is that one of the reasons you went there?

M.G.: I wanted to live there. I went there. I was not disappointed and so I stayed there. Why, I don't know. (...)

E.V.: Do you feel at home in Paris?

M.G.: Oh absolutely, from the first minute. But it came out of my reading.

E.V.: And what about when you get back to your real home?

M.G.: Well, what is a real home? It's in your mind really.

E.V.: Do you feel that you have a home Louis?

L.d.B.: Moi? Partout. As I say, I really like everywhere I've been and I'm very confused about where I should buy a house.

M.G.: Buy a mobile home and take it with you wherever you go!

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